Cooking Trends Echo Changing Roles of Women

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Until recently, food preparation has been largely the work of women. One of the most important developments affecting America's eating habits in the past 100 years has been the evolution of new roles for women (and men), as more women have entered the workforce and families have become smaller. New technologies and changes in gender relationships have both played a role. Better kitchen appliances and the availability of more processed foods have cut the amount of time necessary to prepare food and helped make it possible for women to do more things outside the home. This, in turn, has brought even more demand for convenience in food preparation and has spurred the long-term trend toward eating out.

Domestic Labor Was Full Time for Most Women in 1900

A century ago, domestic labor took the equivalent of a full work week, mostly related to food. According to a survey at the time, a typical women spent 44 hours a week preparing meals and cleaning up after them. Another 7 hours each went to cleaning and doing laundry. When child care was added in, women had little time left for leisure.

A woman's economic status, of course, could make a big difference in her housework load. Women in the upper middle classes and above often employed domestic servants to do most or all of these chores. In these cases, work by the woman of the house consisted mainly of planning and management.

On the other hand, women from poor families had to balance housework and child care with the need to take outside work to support their families. A large portion of Southern Black women, for example, found employment as cooks and maids in the houses of White women. Many poorer city women worked in factories; many others,

By the 1930's, an air of efficiency dominated as women spent less time in sleek, up-to-date kitchens full of modern appliances. Rural homes modernized less quickly as electricity slowly moved out from urban areas.

Credit: USDA

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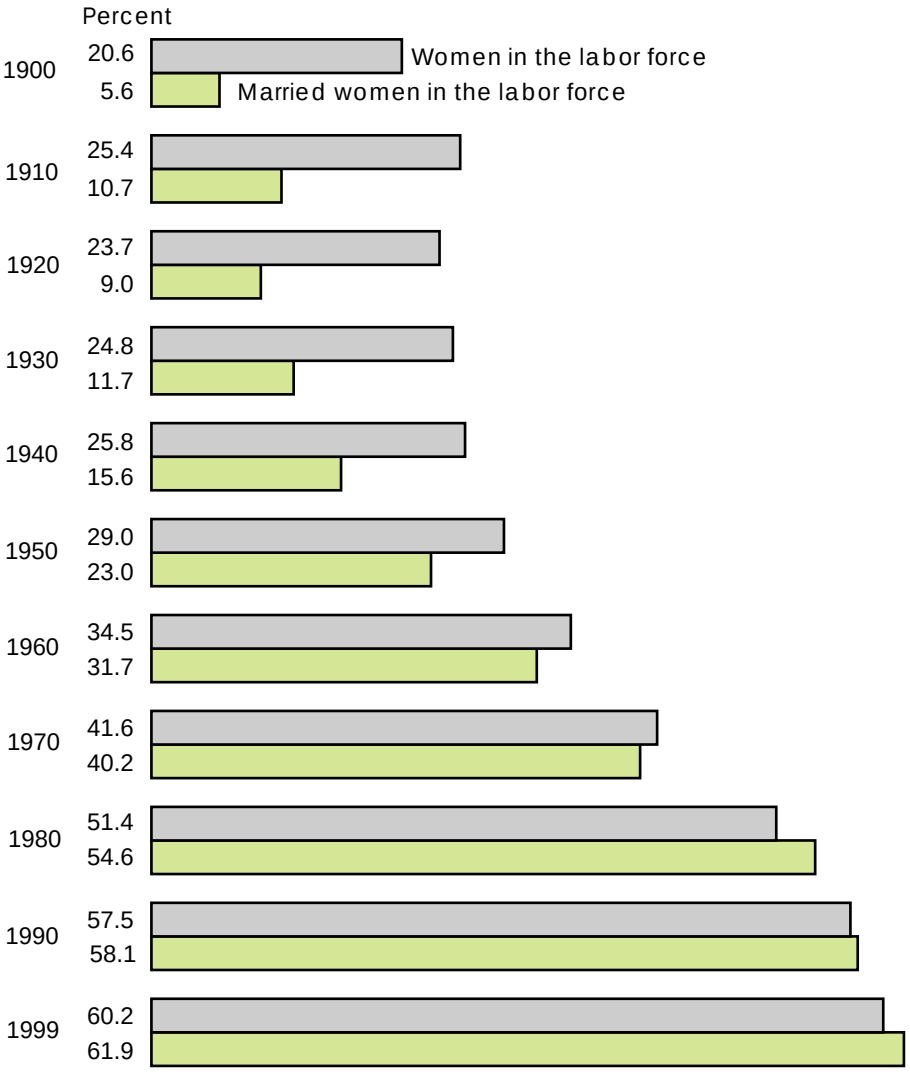
especially immigrants, did manufacturing work at home. Overall, 20.6 percent of women over the age of 15 were in the paid labor force in 1900. Only 5.6 percent of married women were counted in the labor force, however (fig. 1). Farm women—rarely included in the labor force—also usually made a cash contribution to the farm in addition to housework, often raising poultry and eggs and managing the dairy.

Women were usually the gardeners as well, and many women canned or dried food from their gardens for year-round consumption. This was especially true in rural areas—where 60 percent of the population lived in 1900—but many women in towns also gardened or kept a few chickens. The relatively large average household size of 1900 (4.8 family members) added to the burden of keeping house but could also provide some relief. While only 5.1 percent of households had just one person, more than 20 percent contained seven or more. Women with older children or adult female relatives living with them could count on some help in doing housework.

Figure 1
The Share of Married Women in the U.S. Labor Force Now Equals That of All Women



Source: U.S. Bureau of Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Food preparation in 1900 was still very time-consuming. The coal and wood stoves commonly used were a big improvement over the open-hearth cooking practiced by earlier Americans, but were labor intensive. Wood had to be cut and coal hauled for fuel. Soot from stoves complicated cleaning. Since few houses had indoor plumbing, water for cooking and all other purposes had to be pumped and carried in from outside. Most food was still prepared from scratch. Bread was baked at home in rural areas, with one day each week being largely devoted to baking. Ice boxes were widely used in towns to keep food cool, as were springs on farms, but much store- or market-bought food had to be purchased fresh and used quickly in season. Women who canned part of the harvest found the job rewarding but laborious.

However, 1900 saw signs of changes to come that would lighten the burden of food preparation. Electric and gas lines reached an increasing number of urban houses, setting the stage for the impressive array of small appliances that would later appear on the market. A number of new utensils had already been introduced: specialized pots and pans, measuring cups and spoons, and a variety of useful gadgets, such as apple corers and mechanical beaters. Processed foods were beginning to be seen in more groceries. Dry cereals, introduced in the 1890's as health foods, replaced cooked breakfasts in many households. Canned goods increased in number and variety to include many fruits and vegetables, some meats, and condensed soups.

Moreover, nutritionists at the turn of the century urged Americans to scale back the large, heavy meals that had characterized cooking in the late 19th century and replace them with simpler, lighter meals (see "America's Fascination With Nutrition" elsewhere in this issue). Women who took this advice found they could also save time in the kitchen. Nutrition education was largely undertaken by home economists, a growing group of professional women who, by 1900, were finding a place not only in women's colleges but in public high schools. Home economists exposed school-age girls to the new science of nutrition, to new ideas about the efficient organization of housework, and to new appliances.

Home economics got a strong boost from the establishment of a national extension service by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1914. Quickly growing into a system that reached most rural counties, the extension service had home economists teach by visiting homes, giving lectures, forming home-economics study clubs, and conducting tours so that women could inspect the latest in household conveniences, water systems, and arrangement of work spaces.

New Technologies, Diets Benefit 1920's and 1930's "New Woman"

By the 1920's, the incipient changes at the turn of the century were beginning to transform women and their work. Breaking with Victorian past, the "new woman" of the 1920's was more likely to be employed (11.7 percent of married women were in the labor force by 1930), more likely to have attended high school, and more likely to take an interest in activities outside the home. Starting in 1920, women could directly influence the political process by voting, and they readily got behind the wheels of the newly affordable, massed-produced automobiles that were flooding the market. These women still expected to marry and raise children, but they eagerly sought new machines and gadgets that could reduce the time spent on housework.

New technology was altering housework in the 1920's. By the mid-1920's electric washing machines, irons, and vacuum cleaners were widely used. Electric or gas ranges were rapidly supplanting maintenance-heavy wood and coal ranges. Electric refrigerators were also starting to replace less reliable ice boxes. Toasters, electric mixers, and other conveniences likewise gained in popularity. The up-to-date kitchen of the 1920's, with its neat arrangement of sleek appliances, bore some resemblance to the scientific laboratory and carried the same aura of efficiency and modernity.

Of course, much of this new technology depended on electricity, which was slower in reaching rural areas. Urban areas grew at a much faster pace—they had surpassed rural areas in population by 1920—and could be wired for electricity more economically. In 1930, almost 85 percent of nonfarm dwellings had electricity, nearly double the percentage in 1920. By contrast, only 10.4 percent of farm dwellings were connected to the electric power grid in 1930. Nevertheless, electric power usage by residential customers nationwide more than tripled between 1920 and 1930.

Changes in diet were also saving time for women. The trend toward lighter and simpler foods accelerated in the 1920's, spurred by the wartime drive for leaner eating and the newly popular slim ideal for women. Just as store-bought cereals had replaced cooked breakfasts for many Americans, so sandwiches and other light fare replaced hot lunches. This was especially true for working people, who patronized the growing variety of lunch counters and other quick-service eateries. An array of new convenience foods was carried in grocery stores—packaged desserts, pancake mixes, bouillon cubes, and others. Commercially canned goods also multiplied. Almost any fruit or vegetable and even some main courses, such as spaghetti, could be bought canned in the 1920's. Rural women scaled back their home production and preservation of fruits, vegetables, and meats and began buying more processed food in stores, now easier to reach by automobile.

Surveys showed that, by the mid-1920's, the time spent by women in meal preparation and cleanup had fallen from 44 hours per week to under 30 hours. Urban women spent several hours less than rural women. Middle class women who had depended on servants to do domestic work were especially glad for the change because, by the 1920's, servants were becoming harder to find as the status of that occupation dwindled. At the same time, advertisements in women's magazines often depicted middle class women performing tasks that earlier ads had shown servants doing.

During the Depression decade of the 1930's, the percentage of women in the workforce continued to rise slowly. With unemployment high, however, the popular press put renewed emphasis on women's role in the home for fear that women might be taking jobs from men. Home economists stressed wise food management so that families with limited resources could stretch their food dollars. Despite the Depression, labor-saving devices continued to enter the kitchen. The establishment of the Rural Electrification Administration in 1935, which greatly sped the electrification of rural areas, allowed many rural women to enjoy some of the electric appliances previously available only in towns. It also helped increase the number of rural houses

with indoor plumbing—an essential part of the modern kitchen. Girls who were not acquainted with modern appliances at home might be introduced to them in school, often thanks to donations by appliance manufacturers and electric and gas companies. By 1938, nearly 90 percent of junior and senior high school girls took home economics or similar classes.

World War II Brings More Women Into Workforce

World War II brought a quick end to the Depression and unemployment. With millions of men away at war, women joined the labor force in unprecedented numbers. By 1944, a record 35 percent of women were in the labor force, including a quarter of all married women. Many of these working women had to juggle outside employment with household duties. Women were urged to maintain their focus on family and home, even if most of their day was spent in a war factory.

The war made housework more challenging for all women. Food rationing complicated meal planning, while wartime shortages of nonmilitary goods made it difficult to obtain conveniences like refrigerators, washing machines, and other appliances. Many domestic workers—especially Southern Black women—left middle class households for more lucrative jobs in defense plants. Government pamphlets and advertisers offered advice on how women could win the war on the "kitchen front" through purchasing food prudently, salvaging fats and greases, and carefully conserving scarce meats. With USDA encouragement, millions of women planted victory gardens and rediscovered lost home canning skills. By 1943, more than 40 percent of the fresh vegetables consumed in the United States were grown in some 20 million victory gardens.

Postwar America: Prosperity and Convenience

Americans emerged from World War II prosperous and eager to return to peacetime pursuits. Female employment dropped as soldiers came back and many women returned to their customary roles in the home. As the postwar baby boom got underway, women's magazines reinforced the traditional ideal of woman as homemakers and mothers. Educators suggested that the increasing number of women going to college ought to receive better instruction in household management so they would be ready for the day when they gave up their careers for marriage. The ideal wife, according to popular magazines, was intelligent and well-educated, could cook delicious meals, did housework efficiently, and spent lots of time nurturing her children.

But postwar prosperity and technology were creating a climate that would eventually bring an end to women being seen as mainly homemakers. Following the war, the United States embarked on a long period of sustained economic growth. The technological revolution in agriculture lowered food prices and spurred an exodus of farm families to cities, where they were often better paid. Many blue-collar families were able to purchase houses for the first time, and millions of those houses were built in the burgeoning suburbs. The new houses featured modern kitchens and practical designs that made housework more efficient. Rising incomes allowed families to buy the latest appliances. By 1950, 80 percent of families owned mechanical refrigerators, and by 1960, nearly three-quarters owned electric washing machines. Progress was especially apparent in rural areas, where over 90 percent of rural families received electric service by 1953.

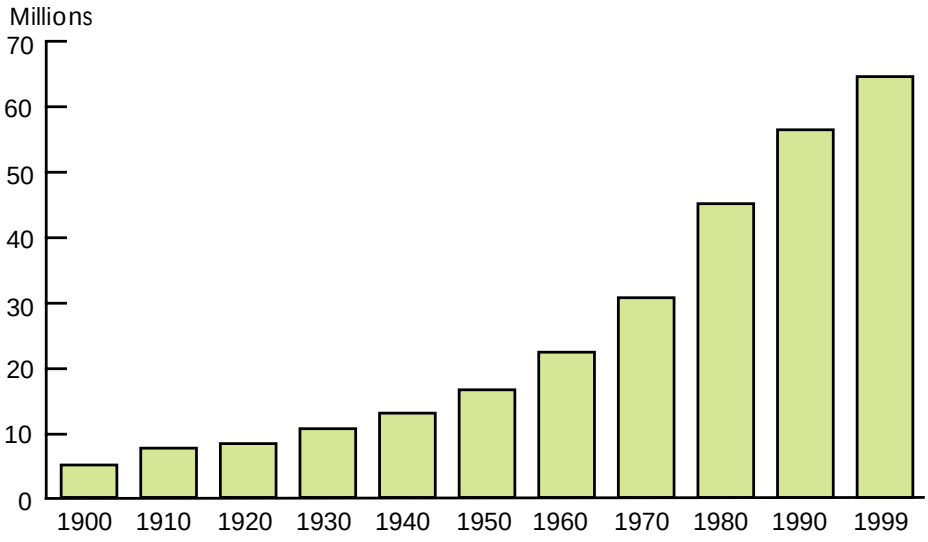
Never had food been easier to prepare than in the 1950's. Housewives could now choose from a variety of frozen foods, a technology that had been important to the military during the war. In 1951, the first frozen pot pies appeared, followed in 1954 by the type of meal that became a symbol of the 1950's, the TV dinner. Women who had taken up home canning during the war generally gave it up in preference for store-bought processed foods. This included rural women, who, as the general farm was replaced by increasingly specialized operations, became more like urban women in their shopping habits. More packaged mixes also appeared on the shelves, including mixes for staples like mashed potatoes. Cookbooks and women's magazines of the period featured recipes using the new frozen, canned, and powdered foods. Casseroles (sometimes consisting almost entirely of canned foods) appealed for their simplicity. Some women also got a break when their husbands took up barbequing, a popular summertime activity by the late 1950's.

Time spent on meal preparation and clean-up dropped below 20 hours a week in the 1950's. Some other aspects of maintaining a house, such as shopping, tended to expand. Rising standards of cleanliness also canceled out some of the technological gains in house cleaning and laundry work. Nevertheless, the time and labor necessary for basic household chores had fallen substantially since the turn of the century. This was a crucial development because no longer could housework be seen as an arduous, more-than-full-time job.

While nearly everyone held to the importance of mothers staying home to care for children, an increasing number of women looked to outside work to enrich their lives as well as enhance their family incomes. After the postwar

drop in female employment, the long-term upward trend started again (fig. 2). By 1960, 34.5 percent of women were again in the labor force, including a record 31.7 percent of married women. This happened even though women were paid substantially less than men and had few opportunities outside of jobs traditionally considered suitable for women.

Figure 2
Women's Presence in the U.S. Labor Force Has Increased Sharply Since 1960



Source: U.S. Bureau of Census and Bureau of Labor Statistics.

New Roles for Women—and Men—in the 1960's and 1970's

The forces changing women's lives, which had become evident by the 1950's, accelerated in the 1960's and 1970's. Spurred by labor-saving household technology and the civil rights revolution, women were ready to question the old assumptions about their position in society. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination not only against racial minorities but also on the basis of sex. This became the legal basis for a profound change in the workplace by which jobs of every description opened to women.

At the same time, the women's liberation movement led to a rethinking of gender roles. People of both sexes came increasingly to see careers for women as a viable alternative to women as full-time homemakers. By 1980, more than half of women over 16 were in the labor force. Similarly, public opinion began to look with favor on men who shared housekeeping and child care with their wives. This included kitchen duty. Men whose cooking expertise had been limited to the outside grill or the can opener began to take a deeper interest in cooking.

The trend toward convenience continued in the 1960's and 1970's. Helpful technology continued apace. These decades witnessed fads for crockpots, blenders, food processors, and juicers. The new gadgets were often shipped with cookbooks promising a myriad of uses for each one. Nonstick pans cut cleanup time as did automatic dishwashers, which were becoming standard equipment.

Another trend that saved time in the kitchen was eating out. Once done mainly by travelers and office workers, eating out became popular with families when moderately priced restaurant chains such as Howard Johnson's spread across the country in the postwar era. By the 1960's, fast food outlets added another option (see "American Cuisine in the 20th Century" elsewhere in this issue). Families who lacked the time for even sit-down restaurant meals could pick up fast food and eat it in their cars or take it home.

One thing that made fast food so attractive was the changing family of the 1960's and 1970's. Although the Baby Boom ended and household size continued to shrink, rising divorce rates meant that more children were being raised by only one parent. The tradition of family meals was on the wane. With breakfast on the run and lunch at the office or school, it was no wonder that the weekly time spent on meal preparation and cleanup had dropped to just 10 hours in 1975.

Yet, paradoxically, these same years saw a reaction against the bland food of the 1950's and a renewed interest in creative cooking. Gourmet cooking, with its often exotic sauces and time-consuming methods, became popular in the 1960's, thanks to Julia Child and a variety of new cookbooks that urged cooks to abandon cans, jars, and mixes for fresh ingredients. This was especially true of French cooking, driven by the postwar popularity of American tourism in Europe. Postwar prosperity also encouraged Americans to look for ways to improve the quality of their lives, such as sampling the world's better cuisines. In the 1970's, a new wave of immigration extended the gourmet cooking vogue to a variety

of ethnic foods, such as Asian and Hispanic. These could be tried at new ethnic restaurants and explored in depth through a wave of new cookbooks that brought recipes from every corner of the world to American cooks. American regional cooking also experienced a revival in the 1970's, thanks in part to the 1976 bicentennial celebration.

The desire for high-quality food created a dilemma for home cooks. Those who took up gourmet cooking were rarely willing to abandon speed and convenience entirely, fueling an interest in preparing such food without sacrificing time. Cooking courses, for example, claimed to offer simple ways to learn the secrets of almost any cuisine. Many cooks were likewise convinced that owning the right gadgets would solve the problem. Specialized kitchen equipment stores (themselves a new phenomenon) happily supplied woks, crepe and omelette pans, yogurt makers, fondue pots, wire whisks, and many other utensils to buyers who hoped that the right equipment would make gourmet cooking easy. Another solution was recipes that promised superior results in a few simple steps. This hope was aptly symbolized by Pierre Franey's "60-Minute Gourmet" column, which began its long run in the *New York Times* in 1975. A number of cookbooks adopted the same approach.

Today's Desire for Convenience Coexists With Older Ideals

American cooking habits in the 1980's and 1990's reflect the effects of hectic work and home schedules. The number of hours worked has increased for many Americans over the past two decades, especially among professionals and managers. More women are choosing full-time over part-time work. By 1998, only a quarter of married couples with one or more persons in the labor force conformed to the traditional family where the husband had a job and the wife stayed at home. Almost 70 percent of women in such couples with children under 18 were in the labor force. Moreover, the percentage of one-parent families has risen from 9.1 percent of all families in 1960 to 27.3 percent in 1998. People living in two-earner and single-parent households have less time to fix meals. In addition, the number of people living alone—a group with little incentive to spend time in the kitchen—now makes up a quarter of all households (see "A Century of Population Growth and Change" elsewhere in this issue).

These changes have worked against eating at home. Time spent on meal preparation has continued to drop. Today, though, the reason has less to do with technological advances in the kitchen than with lack of time. One new appliance that has been a time-saver is the microwave oven. Widely purchased in the 1980's, over 90 percent of households have one today. Recent surveys have also revealed that many Americans feel they lack the knowledge necessary to cook well.

In 1998, 47 percent of the food dollar was spent on food away from home, compared with only 30 percent in 1965. The more recent increase came mainly from fast food outlets, which now exceed restaurants and lunch rooms in sales. Since the 1970's, even breakfast has been available at fast food outlets. Snacking has also increased in popularity. For young people especially, snacks often replace meals.

Yet older ideals about the importance of good home eating to family life have persisted in the face of changing practices. Gourmet cooking, cooking courses, and cookbooks remain popular, perhaps more so than ever. Bread makers and rice cookers have joined the list of new appliances purchased with hope, even if soon relegated to the back of the counter. Gourmet kitchens have become one of the most demanded items in new houses, expressing perhaps more of a dream than a reality.

Today, women still do most of the cooking but, in our smaller and more mobile families, men often share at least part of the load. Even at a time when fewer families gather together for supper and when the tradition of Sunday dinner has been in decline for decades, popular magazines still promote the family meal. The well-prepared meal, indeed, has come to be seen as something that can help hold families together. Food industry analysts have observed that, to keep meals in the home, some cooks are using fewer dishes prepared from scratch (only 55 percent of American dinners have one or more homemade dish, according to one survey), cooking larger meals so the leftovers can be used for a second meal, and making more one-dish meals to reduce side dishes. Food processors have continued to introduce conveniences that make home cooking easier, such as individually wrapped hamburger patties and marinated meats.

Another thing that has helped keep home cooking alive is concern for nutrition, higher now than it has ever been. Scientists have discovered many new links between food and health in the past 20 years. This has not prevented the steady rise in fast food and high-fat/empty-calorie snacking, but many people are making an effort to improve their nutrition. It is easier to lower fat intake with home-prepared foods than to find low-fat foods at fast food outlets. But nutritious food is often perceived as taking longer to fix. Early in the century, good nutrition meant simplifying meals. Today it often means adding more variety and more fresh ingredients, which can lengthen preparation time. The growing popularity of natural foods supermarkets and farmers' markets shows that many people are willing

to seek out fresh, less-processed foods. Recent developments, such as precut vegetable packages and salad bars in grocery stores, have shortened the preparation time for using fresh ingredients.

Finally, a new trend has combined both the desire for convenience and the ideal of the home family meal: complete meals eaten but not prepared at home, such as home meal replacements—fully-prepared meals, sold mainly in grocery stores—that can offer a more nutritious alternative to much of the food sold in fast food outlets. Sales of home meal replacements at supermarkets soared in the 1990's.

Another growth area has been home delivery of restaurant food, which has moved far beyond pizza. This growth is reflected in the number of restaurant meals consumed off the premises. Between 1984 and 1996, the number of such meals has grown 51 percent and now exceeds meals consumed on-premises, though, of course, fast food accounts for part of this growth. The increase has been especially strong for dinners. The trend toward bringing meals prepared by eating places or grocery stores into the home will likely continue, as the food industry searches for new ways for busy families to share meals together around the dinner table.

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